DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 105 471 CS 201 997

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TITLE Storyteller: Endangered Species?
PUB DATE Apr 75
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference on the Language Arts in the Elementary School (7th, Boston, April 11-13, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Communication (Thought Transfer); *Educational Objectives; Elementary Education; English Instruction; *Language Arts; *Oral Communication; Oral English; *Story Telling; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that storytelling needs to be reexamined in light of the changing nature of the elementary school. The problems of storytelling are discussed and five teaching procedures are offered: it is important for the teacher to read several stories before selecting one; the story must be divided into units of action; those sections of the story which need to be memorized verbatim should be identified; the story must be rehearsed; and progress should be monitored, usually by means of a tape recorder. There are three reasons why children should experience stories which are told, rather than read: students should gain an understanding about the oral tradition in literature; telling stories provides active involvement for children; and storytelling acts as a valuable stimulus for children to begin telling stories on their own. (TS)

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STORYTELLER:ENDANGERED SPECIES?

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"Once it was the middle of winter..."
"There was once a man who..."
"Once upon a time two princes..."
"A long time ago there was a ..."

Specific words vary, but no matter: when uttered by a story teller, such beginnings as these hold promise of unalloyed delight to follow. Children respond instinctively to a well-told tale, evidence of the magic potential of this oral art.

Children are not alone however. Last year I attended this convention, and was among a group of adults held enthralled by a gifted storyteller. From his opening sentence until the concluding lines, some 40 minutes later, the room was almost silent. It was not the silence of adults being polite: rather it was the hush which comes with intense concentration. Several times since I have thought of the implications of this experience for education in the schools. More particularly, I have pondered the questions: Why do so few of us learn to tell stories? Why are children so seldom exposed to the joy of a well-told story?

Few of us could hope to match the skill of that talented gentlemen who regaled us with an engrossing tale at the convention. He, well into middle age, has devoted a lifetime to this specialty. Yet even if we couldn't achieve such highly developed skill, I still wondered about the lack of storytelling in schools. On reflection, it seems there are two fundamental forces which mitigate against the teacher as storyteller.

An Examination of Reasons

First, storytelling is an art which requires time to develop. Most elementary classroom teachers experience inordinate demands on their time. They are busy preparing materials, planning learning experiences, mini3cer-

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ing to and conferencing about children's emotional as well as cognitive needs, evaluating success and planning new strategies where success is elusive. All these and other demands limit the amount of time a teacher has for learning a story and sharing it with children. Most teachers would rightly say that finding time to practice reading a story before reading it to children is enough of a task.

Yet there are factors at work in the elementary school which may indeed make storytelling more possible in the next few years. Among these factors are decreasing enrollments. As pupil-teacher rations diminish, more time may be available for such activities as storytelling. When a pupil teacher ratio was 35 to 1, fewer things were possible than now, when it is in many places more like 20 to 25 to 1.

Changing organizational patterns also offer some opportunities. As schools explore new ways to put teachers, paraprofessionals and children together, such patterns as the open classroom and individually prescribed instruction offer new possibilities. Changing ideas about the role of the teacher, with decreasing emphasis on the teacher as presenter of information may provide new opportunities. Perhaps storytelling is more possible now than it was even five years ago. Certainly this first fundamental force mitigating against storytelling needs to be reexamined in light of the changing nature of the elementary school.

A second fundamental problem needs to be dealt with if the teacher is to become an effective storyteller. This is a basic problem: few teachers know how to develop storytelling skills. The reason for this is simple. Few materials currently available offer much help to a teacher who wants to become adept at telling stories.

Techniques for Teachers

It is true that books on storytelling are not new. Two of the best books, those by Marie Shedlock and Ruth Sawyer, are quite old, but are still well worth reading.[1] Newer books are also available.[2] Yet such books generally are written by talented, nay gifted tellers. As such they are long on anecdotes, personal descriptions of favorite stories, and chatty encouragement. They are, however, short on specific skills which can be practiced by teachers who do not possess a natural gift in this area.

Because of this, I would like to share with you some techniques I have evolved in the long process of trying to become an acceptable storyteller. The following procedures have worked for me, and I offer them with the hope that they may be of help to you.[3]

First, read several stories. When it is time for me to learn a new story to tell, I purposely read a half dozen which are unfamiliar to me. Then I wait at least a week during which time I think about the stories in those small moments of unoccupied time we all have. Usually one of the stories keeps coming back to my mind: that is the one I choose to learn.

Second, divide the story into units of action. This is essentially identifying the separate scenes, or units, into which the plot can be divided easily. These sequences of action can be found in any story, once you learn to ignore the descriptive material and concentrate on the action. After you have separated out the bare bones of plot from the surrounding descriptive material, the action can be segmented into separate units of action.

After you have set up the units of action, learn them in sequence. This does not mean memorizing the story word for word, but rather learning the

sequence necessary to moving the story ahead. As you practice saying what must happen in the first unit in order to lead to what happens in the second unit, you will be learning the sequence of the story. Don't worry about trying to use the same words or sentences each time you practice telling the story. Part of the charm of a story which is told is the differences in language which occur as the teller responds to the audience.

Third, identify those sections of the story which do need to be memorized verbatim. Usually these are minimal, and can easily be committed to memory. For example, in the charming Ukranian folk tale, "The Cat and Chanticleer,"[4] there ia a repeated refrain which should be memorized and used verbatim in the telling. The chanticleer calls to the cat for help as the fox captures him:

"Pussy dear! Brother dear!
The fox is taking me
Beyond the green woodlands,
Over the yellow sands,
Beyond the rapid waters,
Over the lofty mountains!
Pussy dear! Brother dear!
Save me, I pray!"

This needs to be incorporated into the telling exactly as it is in the story, because the words contribute to the mood of the story. Similarly, in the superb version of the Snow White tale as translated by the poet Randall Jarrell, the interchange between the wicked Queen and her mirror should be learned and repeated using the exact words provided by Jarrell.[5] The Queen questions the mirror, using words familiar to most listeners:

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall,
Who is fairest of us all?"

But the reply of the mirror is notable for the poetic beauty Jarrell has created:

"Queen, thou art the fairest that I see,
But over the hills, where the seven dwarfs dwell,
Snow-White is still alive and well,
And there is none so fair as she."

Those four lines, for their inherent poetic beauty, deserve to be shared exactly as the translator gave them to us.

In contrast, you might choose to learn the version entitled, "Snowdrop," the Grimm's tale.[6] In this, the units of action are essentially the same, as is the Queen's question to her mirror. But the mirror's response is quite different from the one included by Jarrell.

"Queen, thou art fairest here, I hold,
But Snowdrop over the fells,
Who with the seven Dwarfs dwells,
Is fairer still a thousandfold."

That third line: "Who with the seven dwarfs dwells," is a line of such rich euphony that it demands to be heard exactly as the Grimms provide it.

Fourth, practice the story, incorporating the verbatim sections into the sequence of units of action. Rehearse in a place you will feel comfortable saying the story aloud, for you need to become accustomed to the sound of your voice used this way. Tell the story once or twice a day for at least a week to become fluent.

Fifth, monitor your progress. After you feel secure telling the story, tape record it, but don't listen to it immediately. Then you're too involved in the process to be objective. Rather, wait a few days, to gain the objectivity necessary to evaluate your work. Listen to the tape, in order to try to answer these questions for yourself.

1) What parts of the story need more practice to achieve greater fluency? (Are there places where the sequence still eludes you, and the flow is interrupted? If so, close your eyes and try to visualize that particular unit of action in more detail.)

2) What parts of the story need to be changed for greater effectiveness? (Are there places where you need to expand, or condense

your telling of a particular unit of action? Are there places where you need to add, or delete some description?)

3) Are there places where you need to choose a different word which will evoke a mood more clearly?

4) Are there places where you need to change your use of paralinguistic elements--pitch, stress, pause, and tempo--to achieve greater effectiveness?

After such thoughtful analysis, and resultant repractice, you're ready for the reward: sharing the story with your children.

Becoming a competent storyteller is personally rewarding for the teacher. Yet such is scarcely enough justification to make the recommendation that teachers develop storytelling skills. What happens to children whose teacher can tell stories?

Of What Value

In advocating that teachers take the time, and make the effort to tell stories, it is crucial to identify the values which accrue when children hear stories told. It is not enough to admonish teachers; rather, significant reasons must be given for including storytelling in a language arts curriculum.

There are three reasons why children should experience stories which are told, rather than read. The first of these is for understandings which result about the oral tradition in literature. In earlier times, young people in many societies were entertained and instructed by elders of the group, who regularly shared tales. This sharing initiated children into the rich heritage of the group. The tales taught moral lessons and perpetuated the belief system of the group, as well as providing entertainment. In the process, the young learned through example that the basic thread of the story remained the same, though details which enriched and words which made vivid, varied depending on who was telling the story. More recently, with a scope limited to recounting childhood adventures and a small number of well-known stories and rhymes, grandparents entertained

children growing up in our culture. The context shifted from the group to the family unit, and the diversity apparent earlier diminished.

Today few of our children encounter even those happy experiences: we settle for a bed-time story read from a book, or a story read by the teacher. These can, admittedly, be delightful experiences. We have lost, however, the sense of myriad variation prevalent earlier. Now, it is the story of Cinderella--the referring to whatever book the parent or teacher is reading. Few children understand that the Cinderella being read is one version, not necessarily the only version.[7] Rather, perhaps, it is the version shared because of expedience: it is the one stocked by the bookstore, or on the shelf in the school library.

A second important reason for telling stories is for the active involvement provided for children. When teachers have learned a story to tell, and are free of dependence on the book itself, they can plan creative ways to involve children in the story. Many stories include words, sentences or longer refrains which can be taught to children, who then help the teacher tell the story. Much of the alliteration in Kipling provides intriguing involvement for children. Encourage them to say along with you: "On the banks of the great, grey, greasy Limpopo River."[8] Sometimes involvement includes longer repeated refrains, as in Caps for Sale.[9] Children delight in incremental refrains, as in The House that Jack Built,[10] or Ghost in a Four Room Apartment.[11]

Many stories include even longer sections for participation, as Chanticleer's cry for help in the old Ukranian folk tale mentioned earlier. After a few attempts, I find children delight in helping me call out that verse, to foil the fox's evil efforts. Involving children in such oral participation bridges the gap between storytelling and choral

speaking and provides a much more satisfying experience than simple passive listening to stories.

A second way children can be involved is through developing and incorporating gestures in the telling. When I share 'Jack and the Beanstalk' with children, I climb the beanstalk and encourage the children to do so with me. In using 'Hansel and Gretel', we all scatter crumbs, and shut the oven door. In telling 'Chanticleer', I encourage children to mime the cat hitting the foxes with his club. Children revel in this physical involvement: it makes them feel they are an active part of the experience. A peripheral advantage is that such involvement helps hold their attention through even long stories. These simple accompanying gestures, planned informally with the children, provide an easy introduction to creative drama.[12] If children have not been introduced to dramatics, this is an effective way to begin.

A third way children can be involved is through incorporating music in stories where it is appropriate. At first, teachers may make up simple melodies and teach them to children using tone bells of a guitar. The song the cat sings to entice the foxes out of their house in 'The Cat and Chanticleer', is an example of the type of opportunity which exists in many stories. Another approach is to have the children make up a simple melody themselves. Children can contribute melodies line by line, as the teacher jots down in notation what they have sung. Later this can be written on the board for older children, or even taught by rote to younger ones. When working with a class of first graders recently, we recorded the songwriting session. I had been telling them a variant of 'The Gingerbread Boy', and wanted them to have the experience of setting his cumulative refrain to music. Later I listened to our tape recording and jotted down the melody lines they had contributed--for my own security--and then taught the song by rote. They were delighted with their melody.

It's not a memorable one--consisting of only 4 notes, but it gave them a very real sense of accomplishment. They wanted me to tell the story over and over so they could sing their song. Such experiences with simple melodic composition help children develop a sense of themselves as creators of music, not simply as recreators of someone else's composition. This further helps them see how a story can be enriched beyond simple verbal telling.

Your children, too, will enjoy such musical involvement with stories. If you don't feel able to lead children in this informal dictation of melody lines, do contact your music teacher, who will be pleased to have this additional opportunity to incorporate music in the curriculum.

Such are the types of involvement possible for children when you learn stories and tell them. A third basic reason for telling stories to children can be identified. Telling stories is valuable for the stimulus it provides for children's telling. Seeing the teacher--a significant adult--engaged in oral storytelling, helps children understand this art form as a worthy adult activity. The teacher regularly tells stories so that children will want to tell stories.

At first the teacher will encourage children to retell a favorite story they have heard. Later children are encouraged to tell a new ending for an old favorite, and then to make up an original story.

A kindergarten teacher related the experience of sharing several variants of "The Gingerbread Boy" with her children.[13] On successive days she told different versions, encouraging children to notice the similarities and differences. The children were also encouraged to discuss which of the stories they liked best, and give reasons for their choices. The culminating activity was to tell a variation of the story to the class. One child decided to make the runaway to be a hamburger from a well-known national chain of drive-ins. The hamburger rolled out of the shop, eluded a policeman, a mailman, some

shoppers and a delivery man before rolling into the child's school. There it avoided the principal, the secretary, and the janitor, while rolling down the hall. The willful burger, personified with gusto by the child, finally met its untimely end by rolling into the kindergarten, where it was devoured by the children.

An older child, whose teacher had set the stage for children's involvement by telling stories herself, shared this version he had created.

> Roly Poly Pumpkin lived at a restaurant. It rolled off the counter, and out the door. Todd's house was next door. It rolled into Todd's back yard. There was a hill. The wind made the pumpkin tip over. Now it rolled into Scott's yard. Scott found it and carved it into a face, with a bone for a mouth. Scott lit it for Halloween. On Monday he put it out for the gargageman. The pumpkin rolled out into the street. And then the truck came and smashed it flat like a pancake. Spot, the dog, came by and found it in the street. He ate it, and that was the end of it.[14]

These are simply examples of the type of creativity which can result when children see the teacher as storyteller, and are encouraged to emulate this activity.

Techniques for Children

How does the teacher encourage children to tell stories, beyond simply serving as a model? Several specific techniques facilitate the development of children's storytelling ability.

1) The teacher provides time and a place for practice. To become an effective storyteller, anyone needs a quiet place to practice, and time to perfect the telling. It is necessary that there be a place where a child can practice out loud. All tellers need to get used to the sound of their voice engaged in telling a story. Perhaps an unused classroom, an alcove under the steps, even a large closet might serve as a secluded place where those who want to practice may go. In addition, children must have time to practice. Once is not enough. It is only through repeated retellings that the

storyteller decides which details to include, and which words to select. Part of the time spent in oral language development should be given over to practice time for storytelling.

2) The teacher provides feedback to the child. The availability of inexpensive, simple to operate cassette recorders makes it easy for the teacher to provide feedback. When the child feels ready, the cassette can be used to capture the telling, so the child can listen to it, and analyze results. Children will need help in analyzing their oral storytelling. When beginning the process with young children, we discuss what makes a told story interesting. From such a discussion, we can evolve a simple set of evaluation questions, against which the young storyteller can check his or her telling. Questions might include:

   a. Did I remember to include all the important things which need to happen (units of action)?

   b. Did I include enough details so my listeners will be able to "see" the story in their minds?

   c. Did I use my voice differently in various parts of the story?

3) The teacher provides an audience when the child storyteller wants one. Because the teacher has laid the groundwork in the classroom children will be eager to tell stories for their peers. A regular time should be set aside in the classroom for story sharing. For those who are hesitant, opportunities can be set up to tell a story to a younger group of children.

Summary

Using these techniques, and others you evolve, you and your children can use spoken words to weave a web of delight, to intrigue and entrance those who hear the story. Storytelling, not easy, is nonetheless rewarding. Let's prevent the storyteller from being put on the endangered species list!

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3 A more complete explanation of this process is included in Exploring Language With Children by John Warren Stewig (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill, 1974, pp133-138.

4 Bloch, Marie Halun (translator). Ukranian Folk Tales. New York: Coward-McCann, 1964, pp. 11 & ff.

5 Jarrell, Randall. Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1972. Superb book design, from regal endpapers through type face, enhance the meticulous illustrations by Nancy Burkert. The poet's translation is a lyric evocation of a remote time.

6 Grimm, The Brothers. Grimm's Fairy Tales. New York: The Viking Press, Long out of print, this unique collection of tales is again available with the original Arthur Rackham illustrations. An elegantly designed book which effectively conveys the magic and mystery of the tales.

7 To see the variation possible, compare Cinderella by Beni Montresor (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965) and Cinderella by Marianne Moore (New York: The Macmillan Co, 1963) with the better known version by Marcia Brown (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954). The three offer interesting language contrasts.

8 See the handsome large version of Just So Stories by Rudyard Kipling (Garden City: Doubleday and Co, Inc., 1972). Lavishly illustrated with surrealistic full color paintings by Etienne Delessert, the book is well worth sharing with children for its elegant design.

9 Slobodkina, Esphyr. Caps for Sale. New York: W.R. Scott, 1947.

10 Mother Goose. The House that Jack Built. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Co., 1967.

11 Raskin, Ellen. Ghost in a Four Room Apartment. New York: Atheneum, 1969.

12 A further explanation of the relationship between storytelling and drama is included in Spontaneous Drama: A Language Art by John Warren Stewig (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill, 1973)

13 A description and analysis of six versions is included in Read to Write: Using Children's Literature as a Springboard to Writing by John Warren Stewig. (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1975)

14 Stewig, 1975, op. cit.